

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND JEWISH CITIZENS.

BY LEWIS ABRAHAM, *Washington, D. C.*

The number of Israelites in this country prior to the Declaration of Independence was not large, but there is undoubted evidence that they were staunch supporters of the Colonies in their efforts to secure severance from foreign yoke.

When Washington had concluded his labors in the field of war and had attained deserved civic honors, and laurels from all quarters were being showered upon him, the Hebrews joined their fellow-citizens in felicitating the hero and statesman.

The following correspondence is gathered from the *United States Gazette* of 1790; a partial file of this paper can be found in the Congressional Library. It is strange that the letters are not all to be found in books in which the Washington correspondence is compiled.

The original letter addressed to the "Beth Elohim" congregation of Charleston, South Carolina, was carefully preserved among the many other valuable records of that city, but was destroyed by the great fire of 1838. His Honor the Mayor endeavored to obtain a copy from the department of the general government, but after a thorough examination of the records no such document could be found, and after a prolonged search the undersigned was written to and supplied the missing letter.*

* See *Year Book of the City of Charleston* for 1884, p. 280.

THE ADDRESS FROM THE HEBREW CONGREGATION OF THE CITY OF SAVANNAH, GEORGIA, WHICH WAS PRESENTED TO WASHINGTON, THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, BY MR. JACKSON, ONE OF THE REPRESENTATIVES FROM GEORGIA.

*"Sir:—*We have long been anxious of congratulating you on your appointment, by unanimous approbation, to the presidential dignity of this country, and of testifying our unbounded confidence in your integrity and unblemished virtue. Yet however exalted the station you now fill, it is still not equal to the merit of your heroic services through an arduous and dangerous conflict, which has embosomed you in the hearts of her citizens.

Our eccentric situation, added to a diffidence founded on the most profound respect, has thus long prevented our address, yet the delay has realized anticipation, given us an opportunity of presenting our grateful acknowledgments for the benediction of heaven through the magnanimity of federal influence and the equity of your administration.

Your unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy have dispelled that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long as a vail shaded religion—unrivetted the fetters of enthusiasm—enfranchised us with all the privileges and immunities of free citizens, and initiated us into the grand mass of legislative mechanism. By example you have taught us to endure the ravages of war with manly fortitude, and to enjoy the blessings of peace with reverence to the Deity and benignity and love to our fellow-creatures.

May the Great Author of the world grant you all happiness—an uninterrupted series of health—addition of years to the number of your days, and a continuance of guardianship to that freedom which under auspices of heaven your magnanimity and wisdom have given these States.

LEVI SHEFTAL, *President.*

In behalf of the Hebrew Congregations."

To which the President was pleased to return the following:

ANSWER.—TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATIONS OF THE
CITY OF SAVANNAH, GEORGIA.*

“*Gentlemen* :—I thank you with great sincerity for your congratulations on my appointment to the office which I have the honor to hold by the unanimous choice of my fellow-citizens, and especially the expressions you are pleased to use in testifying the confidence that is reposed in me by your congregations.

As the delay which has naturally intervened between my election and your address has afforded me an opportunity for appreciating the merits of the Federal Government and for communicating your sentiments of its administration, I have rather to express my satisfaction rather than regret at a circumstance which demonstrates (upon experiment) your attachment to the former as well as approbation of the latter.

I rejoice that a spirit of liberality and philanthropy is much more prevalent than it formerly was among the enlightened nations of the earth, and that your brethren will benefit thereby in proportion as it shall become still more extensive; happily the people of the United States have in many instances exhibited examples worthy of imitation, the salutary influence of which will doubtless extend much farther if gratefully enjoying those blessings of peace which (under the favor of heaven) have been attained by fortitude in war, they shall conduct themselves with reverence to the Deity and charity toward their fellow-creatures.

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in a promised land, *whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation*, still continue to water them with the dews of heaven and make the inhabitants of every denomination par-

* This reply is printed in Jared Sparks' Collection, vol. XII, p. 185.

ticipate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah. G. WASHINGTON."

ADDRESS OF THE NEWPORT CONGREGATION TO THE
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

"*Sir*.—Permit the children of the stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merit, and to join with our fellow-citizens in welcoming you to Newport.

With pleasure we reflect on those days of difficulty and danger when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword, shielded your head in the day of battle; and we rejoice to think that the same spirit which rested in the bosom of the greatly beloved Daniel, enabling him to preside over the provinces of the Babylonian Empire, rests and ever will rest upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of the Chief Magistrate of these States.

Deprived as we hitherto have been of the invaluable rights of free citizens, we now—with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty Disposer of all events—behold a government erected by the majesty of the people—a government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance, but generously affording to all liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship, deeming every one of whatever nation, tongue or language, equal parts of the great governmental machine.

This so ample and extensive Federal Union, whose base is philanthropy, mutual confidence and public virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the great God who rules in the armies of the heavens and among the inhabitants of the earth, doing whatever seemeth to Him good.

For all the blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Ancient of days, the great

Preserver of men, beseeching Him that the angels who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life; and when, like Joshua, full of days and full of honors, you are gathered to your fathers, may you be admitted into the heavenly paradise to partake of the water of life and the tree of immortality.

Done and signed by order of the Hebrew Congrégation in Newport, Rhode Island. MOSES SEIXAS, *Warden.*

NEWPORT, *August 17, 1790.*"

WASHINGTON'S REPLY TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATION IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND.

*"Gentlemen:—*While I received with much satisfaction your address replete with expressions of esteem, I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you that I shall always retain grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced on my visit to Newport from all classes of citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security.

If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and happy people.

The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy—a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives

to bigotry no factions, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my administration and fervent wishes for my felicity.

May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. WASHINGTON."

THE ADDRESS OF THE HEBREW CONGREGATIONS IN THE
CITIES OF PHILADELPHIA, NEW YORK, RICHMOND AND
CHARLESTON TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

"*Sir* :—It is reserved for you to unite in affection for your character and person every political and religious denomination of men; and in this will the Hebrew congregations aforesaid yield to no class of their fellow-citizens.

We have hitherto been prevented by various circumstances peculiar to our situation from adding our congratulations to those which the rest of America have offered on your elevation to the chair of the Federal Government. Deign, then, illustrious sir, to accept this our homage.

The wonders which the Lord of Hosts had worked in the days of our forefathers have been taught us to observe the greatness of His wisdom and His might throughout the events of the late glorious revolution; and while we humble ourselves at His footstool in thanksgiving and praise for the blessing of His deliverance, we acknowledge you, the leader of American armies, as His chosen and beloved servant.

But not to your sword alone is present happiness to be ascribed ; that, indeed, opened the way to the reign of freedom ; but never was perfectly secure until your hand gave birth to the Federal Constitution and you renounced the joys of retirement to seal by your administration in peace what you had achieved in war.

To the eternal God, who is thy refuge, we commit in our prayers the care of thy precious life ; and when, full of years, thou shalt be gathered unto thy people, thy righteousness shall go before thee, and we shall remember, amidst our regret, ‘ that the Lord hath set apart the godly for himself,’ whilst thy name and thy virtues will remain an indelible memorial on our minds.

MANUEL JOSEPHSON,

For and in behalf and under the authority of the several congregations aforesaid.”

To which the President was pleased to return the following :

ANSWER.—TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATIONS IN THE CITIES OF PHILADELPHIA, NEW YORK, CHARLESTON AND RICHMOND.

“*Gentlemen*.:—The liberality of sentiment toward each other, which marks every political and religious denomination of men in this country, stands unparalleled in the history of nations.

The affection of such a people is a treasure beyond the reach of calculation, and the repeated proofs which my fellow-citizens have given of their attachment to me and approbation of my doings form the purest source of my temporal felicity.

The affectionate expressions of your address again excite my gratitude and receive my warmest acknowledgment.

The power and goodness of the Almighty, so strongly manifested in the events of our late glorious revolution, and His kind interposition in our behalf, have been no less visible in the establishment of our present equal government. In war

He directed the sword, and in peace He has ruled in our councils. My agency in both has been guided by the best intentions and a sense of duty I owe to my country.

And as my exertions have hitherto been amply rewarded by the approbation of my fellow-citizens, I shall endeavor to deserve a continuance of it by my future conduct.

May the same temporal and eternal blessings which you implore for me, rest upon your congregations.

G. WASHINGTON."

Appropriate in view of the foregoing expressions of the father of his country to his Hebrew fellow-citizens is the following correspondence of patriots of the early days of the United States.

In 1818 the Mill Street Synagogue was consecrated. Mordecai M. Noah delivered an eloquent address on the occasion, and sent copies thereof to distinguished statesmen. Among the replies received were the following, which are worthy of preservation :

COPY OF A LETTER FROM THOMAS JEFFERSON.*

"MONTICELLO, *May* 28, 1818.

Sir:—I thank you for the discourse on the consecration of the Synagogue in your city, with which you have been pleased to favor me. I have read it with pleasure and instruction, having learnt from it some valuable facts in Jewish history which I did not know before. Your sect by its sufferings has furnished a remarkable proof of the universal spirit of religious intolerance inherent in every sect, disclaimed by all while feeble, and practiced by all when in power. Our laws have applied the only antidote to this vice, protecting our religious, as they do our civil rights, by putting all on an equal footing. But more remains to be done,

* *Travels in England, France, Spain and the Barbary States in the Years 1813-14 and 15.* By Mordecai M. Noah ; New York and London, 1819. Appendix, pp. xxv and xxvi.

for although we are free by the law, we are not so in practice; public opinion erects itself into an Inquisition, and exercises its office with as much fanaticism as fans the flames of an *Auto-de-fe*.

The prejudice still scowling on your section of our religion, although the elder one, cannot be unfelt by yourselves; it is to be hoped that individual dispositions will at length mould themselves to the model of the law, and consider the moral basis, on which all our religions rest, as the rallying point which unites them in a common interest; while the peculiar dogmas branching from it are the exclusive concern of the respective sects embracing them, and no rightful subject of notice to any other; public opinion needs reformation on that point, which would have the further happy effect of doing away the hypocritical maxim of '*intus et lubet, foris ut moris*.' Nothing, I think, would be so likely to effect this, as to your sect particularly, as the more careful attention to education, which you recommend, and which, placing its members on the equal and commanding benches of science, will exhibit them as equal objects of respect and favor. I salute you with great respect and esteem.

(Signed)

THOMAS JEFFERSON.

M. M. NOAH, Esq."

COPY OF A LETTER FROM JAMES MADISON, ESQ., ON THE
SAME SUBJECT.

"MONTPELIER, May 15, 1818.

Sir:—I have received your letter of the 6th, with the eloquent discourse delivered at the consecration of the Synagogue. Having ever regarded the freedom of religious opinions and worship as equally belonging to every sect, and the secure enjoyment of it as the best human provision for bringing all, either into the same way of thinking, or into that mutual charity which is the only proper substitute, I observe with pleasure the view you give of the spirit in which

your sect partake of the common blessings afforded by our Government and laws.

As your foreign mission took place whilst I was in the administration, it cannot but be agreeable to me to learn that your accounts have been closed in a manner so favorable to you.

(Signed)

JAMES MADISON."

COPY OF A LETTER FROM JOHN ADAMS, ESQ.

"QUINCY, *July* 31, 1818.

Sir:—Accept my best thanks for your polite and obliging favour of the 24th, and especially for the discourse inclosed. I know not when I have read a more liberal or more elegant composition.

You have not extended your ideas of the right of private judgment and the liberty of conscience, both in religion and philosophy, farther than I do. Mine are limited only by morals and propriety.

I have had occasion to be acquainted with several gentlemen of your nation, and to transact business with some of them, whom I found to be men of as liberal minds, as much honor, probity, generosity and good breeding, as any I have known in any sect of religion or philosophy.

I wish your nation may be admitted to all privileges of citizens in every country of the world. This country has done much. I wish it may do more; and annul every narrow idea in religion, government, and commerce. Let the wits joke; the philosophers sneer! What then? It has pleased the Providence of the 'first cause,' the universal cause, that Abraham should give religion, not only to Hebrews, but to Christians and Mahometans, the greatest part of the modern civilized world.

(Signed)

JOHN ADAMS."